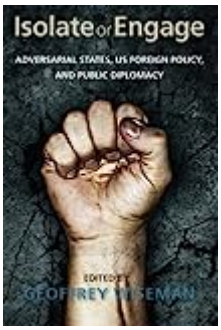
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Geoffrey Wiseman, ed. *Isolate or Engage: Adversarial States, US Foreign Policy, and Public Diplomacy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 328 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-9552-4.

Reviewed by Brent Lawniczak (Air University, Air Command and Staff College)

Published on H-War (March, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Edited by Dr. Geoffrey Wiseman, *Isolate or Engage* consists of nine essays spanning the globe and the gamut of countries with which the United States has historically had, or currently has, a relationship that may be described as adversarial. The essays cover the Soviet Union/Russia, China, North Korea, Vietnam, Libya, Iran, Syria, Cuba, and Venezuela. The nine countries studied cover a wide range of adversarial relationships, from what, during the Cold War, appeared to most observers as an existential, ideological conflict to that of US-Cuba and US-Venezuela relations over a period of decades, in which the reader may come to the conclusion that the players may actually derive some pleasure in the diplomatic (specifically the public diplomacy) fight.

The vitae of the nine authors and the editor lend to the bookâs credibility as a starting point for the discussion advanced: the impact of US policies of isolation, at various levels, on public diplomacy efforts and effectiveness among those populations. The authors are all specialists with extensive experience in âtheirâ respective country. It should be noted, however, that they are not all public diplomacy experts, though this does not detract from the quality or authority of the essays. (Only one author had worked specifically in the arena of public diplomacy before writing for this project.)

The study and resultant essays are based on five âframing questions,â which range from characterization of the US relationship to the specific adversary country (divisive issues), how the level of diplomatic isolation affects the behavior of that country, and how traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy impact, and are impacted by that level of isolation and the adversarial relationship. Wiseman states that as work on the essays progressed, three additional questions were posed to the authors, which expanded the already broad-ranging discussion. This allowed for great latitude for the authors to discuss in detail the specific nature and effects of the adversarial nature of the country in question, but resulted in a work that lost a sense of cohesiveness.

Several of the eight questions actually consist of two or more questions, which may or may not be closely tied to one another in scope and purpose. The lack of cohesion throughout the work is evident as the reader progresses through the several essays. Each essay is thought-provoking in its own right, but every essay does not systematically answer the framing questions posed in the introduction. This is likely due in part to the large number of questions, the broad scope of each question, and the wide latitude in definitions left to each author.

The definition of public diplomacy (PD) which, from this reviewer's perspective, seems to be a pervasive problem in PD literature, and this book is no exception. To their credit, the editor and authors do not shy away from the issue, but attempt address it. Regarding âdefinitional issuesâ in the introduction, Wiseman makes clear the distinction between foreign policy and diplomacy, identifies several forms of public diplomacy, and provides three definitions or types of public diplomacy. The issue that exacerbates the anthologyâs cohesiveness problem previously mentioned is that in addition to the *eight* framing questions, Wiseman also gave wide latitude to the authors to select for their country the âdefinition of public diplomacy [that] was the most apparent in their case â¦ [or] â¦ *develop their own*â (pp. 12-13, emphasis added).

Though not unexpected for a work asserting the efficacy, even primacy, of public diplomacy in international relations, in some places the authors tend to discount the actions, desires, history, and culture of the nation in question. Additionally, although public diplomacy is considered a long-term endeavor (and the essays each span several decades of history), some authors display a political bias in the short term, citing poor or unsophisticated judgement and policies of President Ronald Reagan and/or President George H. Bush, seeming to undercut the larger context of public diplomacy discourse (and the framing questions) to make a political point, while granting overt or barely masked clemency regarding missteps from the opposite end of the political spectrum.

Using a comparative approach, the nine essays are intended to âshow a pattern of disrupted diplomatic relationsâ and âuncover broader patterns that exist â¦ and lessons that can be learned from several contemporary US foreign policy challenges â¦ [and] the role that public diplomacy can play in meeting these challengesâ (p. 19). An admirable goal, and well-written and -presented work, that in conclusion does not seem to identify such patterns, other than possibly concluding that policies of isolation of adversarial countries make public diplomacy difficult in most cases–but not always. Like most other things in international relations, it depends on the actors (both bilateral and multilateral relations). However, the stated purpose of understanding public diplomacy as a two-way street, and the âself-other identity formationâ are well supported, but not always thoroughly explored (p. 20, and p. 287).

The conclusion pares down the initial framing questions to four straightforward questions: â1. When diplomatic relations are limited, how does the United States try to *influence* publics in an adversarial state? 2. Does cutting or limiting diplomatic ties contribute to wider strategic goals or actually *damage* US interests? 3. When diplomatic relations are limited, what are the *challenges* for public diplomacy in adversarial states?4. When diplomatic relations are limited, what are the *opportunities* for public diplomacy in adversarial states?â (p. 281, emphasis in original).

Wiseman concludes that in every case the United States continues, at least in some limited fashion, to at least attempt to influence the publics of adversarial states, even when no formal ties exist, most often (and most effectively) through personal contacts. However, some may question how broadly the impact of only a few personal contacts may be felt in nations consisting of hundreds of millions, or in states with extremely closed, tightly controlled regimes. In the case of the Soviet Union, the author makes an excellent case that person-to-person contact was pivotal in US-USSR relations over different periods of great diplomatic animosity and/or isolation. It may also be argued that China and North Korea learned from this and other examples of US public diplomacy and have inured themselves to it–thus, person-to-person contact may not be broadly applicable. The patterns the books seeks to identify are, at best elastic and, at worst, nonexistent. To seek, as the editor suggests, to apply these lessons (disparate as they are) in US policy formulation toward culturally, ideologically, and historically diverse entities such as the Taliban, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Boko Haram could be problematic at best. Identifying which âpatternâ of diplomacy (based on the several case studies) fits contemporary cases (based on available information and understanding) with amorphous non-state entities will be more difficult than âtraditionalâ public diplomacy–at which the United States, according to this book, is equally likely to fumble as it is to excel.

The conclusion points out several opportunities for public diplomacy in situations lacking formal diplomatic ties (including public diplomacy itself, high-level engagement assisting public diplomacy, NGOs, track-two diplomacy, tourism, scholarship, cultural exchanges, leveraging social media/mass communication, and economic/humanitarian assistance). None of these are particularly revealing or additive to most other public diplomacy literature, though this book does outline specific and interesting historical cases for each of these opportunities, many in combination. When conveying the challenges to public diplomacy in isolated states, gaining access to the publics of closed societies is a common theme–

but again, not a particularly novel conclusion. One aspect that is overlooked in the essays, to some extent, and the conclusion to the book, is how receptive that public is to the message. While access, or being seen as subversive, may seem to be the biggest hurdles to engaging the public of diplomatically isolated nations, it is only part of the equation. Using Wisemanâs own argument that the relationship is dialogic, one would assume that this would enter into the discussion in the conclusion. All of the points made pertaining to challenges are valid; however, one must also question the publicâs loyalty to the regime of its country. While many may be afraid to engage for fear of government or social reprisal, the fact remains that many people, even in the most repressive governments, are supportive of or at least sympathetic to their own government before accepting and acting on the message of another.

Wisemanâs final thought on public diplomacy in nations the United States decides to isolate diplomatically sums up the nature of the study. Here, he concludes that âpublic diplomacy can in some circumstances exacerbate tensions â¦ and that it is not a panacea â¦ [but] is one of many elements that a judicious government can use â¦ to stay informed about, slowly seek change, and improve relations with an adversarial stateâ (p. 299). All but the most grudging readers would agree with this statement, but ultimately this is not particularly revealing or groundbreaking. In the end, it appears that sometimes public diplomacy is helpful in setting up an environment that eventually becomes conducive to formal ties. In other situations (Libya, p. 291) public diplomacy is not required to improve relations between countries and, in fact, may actually undermine diplomatic efforts (China is cited as an example, p. 292). While patterns may emerge with a country, within a region, or possibly across regions, they prove difficult to discern, and thus to apply to new or different groups or countries. After the initial difficulty in identifying specific patterns and definite causal relationships would come the overwhelmingly difficult proposition of determining which actions, messages, or relationships would be beneficial, if even possible, with diverse actors such as the Taliban, Hamas, or Boko Haram.

Understanding that the essays had to be finalized and the book sent to press, it would be interesting to read several of the authorsâ postscripts (if any), specifically regarding Russia, Libya, Iran, and Syria regarding ongoing global and regional events. Dr. Dirk J. Vanderwalleâs conclusion that recent events and the killing of Ambassador Christopher Stephens âunderscore both the need for persistence and the magnitude of the challenges aheadâ (p. 162) could certainly be extended to US public diplomacy efforts writ large. This book furthers the discussion on how traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy have either withered or bloomed based on US policies of isolation or engagement. However, this will demand that the PD community attain a greater level of specificity with regard to definitions and PD actors, which will improve the ability of PD to influence US policies in the formative stage, vice attempting to counter poor policy, or to overcome the multiple obstacles resulting from policies of isolation.

The essays in this book are each entirely worth the read for the novice and the expert alike–whether involved with public diplomacy specifically or international relations generally. However, the collection as a whole fails to do what it set out to–which was to provide a consistent theme, discernable patterns, or significant conclusions regarding public diplomacy toward countries the United States decides to isolate diplomatically. At the very least this volume makes it clear that public diplomacy faces multiple hurdles, independent of the level of adversarial relationship the United States has with another country.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Brent Lawniczak. Review of Wiseman, Geoffrey, ed., *Isolate or Engage: Adversarial States, US Foreign Policy, and Public Diplomacy.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2016.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45331

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.